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I've Started So I'll Finish

by Dan Judd

Remember, remember the fifth of November, gunpowder treason and plot. The trouble was Alice wouldn't really remember that night. The one when another power cut caught mum short. A rare Saturday night together with mum trying to steer the conversation only for it to hit the rocks.

Fast forward and Alice could kick herself for not remembering mum's bombshell. The information no longer much use, like a sodden rocket. Not taking off due to the first raindrops of an oncoming storm.

November 5th 1977 and with the procession rained off and extra staff already hired, Jeannie took an unprecedented step. She took the night off. She called her daughter. They'd drink wine, have a good old gossip and she'd show off the cassette recorder she'd got her grandson for Christmas.

"Thanks, mum, Freddy's going to love this."

Jeannie beamed.

"Better make sure it works."

The niceties didn't last. Something about the actor in her made Alice always reach for the punchline.

"One of the Dean Meat man's dodgy deals, was it? Buy this block of immature cheddar and get a free gift?"

Alice was right of course; Jeannie always had a twinkle on delivery days.

"Right, there's a tape in there, already. Just press play and record."

Despite Alice's instructions, her mum struggled so she took over, impatient as ever.

"He'll probably use it to tape the adverts. Or to practice his impressions," Jeannie joked, waiting to see if her daughter would go on the defensive.

"Hah! You may have a point, there. Mind you his Frank Spencer is rather good."

"He should get out more, make some friends," needled Jeannie.

"He's just shy. It's not like you've got many," said Alice, escalating the banter into something more toxic.

"Well, I had the pub to run."

"And two mouths to feed."

Alice had heard it all before.

"Hold on mum I'll get out my tiny violin," she added.

"I knew lots of people. Customers, delivery people. And Phyll."

Here we go again, thought Alice but even she knew she was taking things too far.

"The one dad left you for. I've heard this all before. And you know it upsets you."

"That's just it... I don't think it was Phyllis he left me for. It just didn't make sense."

This was new.

Mum was always so bloody cryptic. It's like her brain had an emergency panic button, sending a jumble of words, to mask the truth that seconds before she was itching to get out there. But this time she didn't have to do anything. God and the electricity grid intervened.

"Bugger, power cut. Fetch the matches for us. They should be on the side, there."

"Blimey, they are!" Alice joked. Pleased for the opportunity to lighten the mood and the room.

"Cheek!"

"And next to a candle. Wonders will never cease! Here we go."

Alice illuminated them both with a strike of a Swan Vesta.

"The kettles still hot, shall we have a Bovril?" she asked.

Mum's face was a picture. As if someone who virtually had a drip-feed of brandy would want something quite so erm, beefy.

"Shall we play a game, then?"

Jeannie called her bluff.

"How about cards, your dad loved cards. Lived by them. Gin Rummy?"

“Heavy on the gin, knowing you. It’s a good job there’s not a card game called Martell. You’d win hands down.”

“Cheek. There’s always Monopoly.”

“You, a candle and paper money. It’s not going to happen. And, anyway you cheat.”

Both on fine form, they looked each other and positively glowed.

“No respect for your mother!”

“You have to earn respect,” Alice served back.

“Cheek! I just have a different approach to banking. If the war taught me one thing, it was to hide your assets.”

“Was that because of all those damn Yanks? Over here and over sexed, weren’t they?”

For once her mother was lost for words. Alice had won the game.

They laughed. Played five or six hands. Mrs Veal Senior winning four. Later, Hope would be sure there’d been another queen of heart played. Then the balance of power was restored.

“And we’re back. Let there be light!” decreed Alice ever the actor.

Jeannie, blew out the candle. Eyes closed as if it was her birthday. Making a wish.

Slowly the telly flickered into life. That wee man with the glasses was sitting on a big black chair, looking like a schoolchild who had sneaked onto the Mastermind set. But Freddy would point out it couldn’t have been the well-loved Mastermind sketch, as it was first broadcast in 1980 not 1977. It was just another one of Ronnie Corbett’s monologues. Freddy trotted this out every time the tale was told, but they never listened. Never remembered.

But it was hard to erase that sketch, that memory, however false. It would be played out in re-runs and endless compilations. According to them that night on the 5th November 1977 the laughter was at its heartiest. A perfect mother and daughter memory.

And mum would never answer the question before last. Not that night anyway, if ever. The story had been interrupted. Half-truths disappeared into the half-light.